

# WINNING YOUR SPIRITUAL BATTLES



*Hope. Pure and simple.*

*By Max Lucado*

## Introduction

*In 1066, one of history's most decisive battles was fought. William, Duke of Normandy, dared to invade England. He confidently approached his formidable opponent with his secret weapon, an invention that would give his army an edge: the stirrup.*

*The English, on foot, would be easily conquered by the Normans, standing secure in their stirrups. Because they had a way to stand in the battle, they were victorious.*

*On the battleground of temptation, Christians have been assured the victory. We have a way to stand in the battle. Jesus. Lord of Heaven. Defeater of death. He's our secret weapon.*

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# TRIUMPH OVER TEMPTATION

I still chuckle when I think about the joke I heard about the game warden who got a quick lesson on fishing.

It seems he noticed how this one particular fellow named Sam consistently caught more fish than anyone else. Whereas the other guys would only catch three or four a day, Sam would come in off the lake with a boat full. Stringer after stringer was always packed with freshly caught trout.

The warden, curious, asked Sam his secret. The successful fisherman invited the game warden to accompany him and observe. So the next morning the two met at the dock and took off in Sam's boat. When they got to the middle of the lake, they stopped the boat and the warden sat back to see how it was done.

Sam's approach was simple. He took out a stick of dynamite, lit it, and threw it in the air. The explosion rocked the lake with such a force that dead fish immediately began to surface. Sam took out a net and started scooping them up.

Well, you can imagine the reaction of the game warden. When he recovered from the shock of it all, he began yelling at Sam. "You can't do this! I'll put you in jail, buddy! You will be paying every fine there is in the book!" Sam, meanwhile, set his net down and took out another stick of dynamite. He lit it and tossed it in the lap of the game warden with these words, "Are you going to sit there all day complaining or are you going to fish?"

The poor warden was left with a fast decision to make. He was yanked, in one second, from an observer to a participant. A dynamite of a choice had to be made and be made quickly!

Life is like that. Few days go by without our coming face to face with an uninvited, unanticipated, yet unavoidable decision. Like a crashing snowbank, these decisions tumble upon us without warning. They disorientate and bewilder. Quick. Immediate. Sudden. No council, no study, no advice. Pow! All of a sudden you are hurled into the air of uncertainty and only instinct will determine if you will land on your feet.

Want a good example? Look at the three apostles in the garden. Sound asleep. Weary from a full meal and full week, their eyelids too heavy, they are awakened by Jesus only to tumble back into dreamland. The last time, however, they were awakened by Jesus to clanging swords, bright torches, and loud voices.

"There he is!"

"Let's get him!"

A shout. A kiss. A shuffling of feet. A slight skirmish. All of a sudden it is decision time. No time to huddle. No time to pray. No time to mediate or consult friends. Decision.

Peter makes his. Out comes the sword. Off goes the ear. Jesus rebukes him. Now what?

Mark, who apparently was a young eyewitness, wrote these words, "Then everyone deserted him

and fled.”<sup>1</sup>

That’s a nice way of saying they ran like scared mice. The only thing that was moving faster than their feet was their pulse rate. All those words of loyalty and commitment were left behind in a cloud of dust.

But before we get too hard on these quick-footed followers, let’s look at ourselves. Maybe you have been in the garden of decision a few times yourself. Has your loyalty ever been challenged? Have you ever passed by this trap door of the devil?

For the teenager it could be a joint being passed around the circle. For the businessman it could be an offer to make a little cash “under the table.” For the wife it could be a chance for her to give her “two bits” of juicy gossip. For the student it could be an opportunity to improve his grade while looking at his friend’s quiz. For the husband it could mean an urge to lose his temper over his wife’s spending. One minute we are in a calm boat on a lake talking about fishing, in the next we have a stick of dynamite in our hands.

More often than not, the end result is catastrophe. Rather than calmly defusing the bomb, we let it explode. We find ourselves doing the very thing we detest. The child in us lunges forward, uncontrolled and unrestrained, and the adult in us follows behind shaking his head.

Now, it doesn’t have to be like that. Jesus didn’t panic. He, too, heard the swords and saw the clubs, but he didn’t lose his head. And it was his head that the Romans wanted!

In rereading the garden scene we can see why. One statement made by our master offers two basic tools for keeping our cool in the heat of a decision. “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.”<sup>2</sup>

All Jesus is saying is, “pay attention.” You know your weaknesses. You also know the situations in which your weaknesses are most vulnerable. Stay out of those situations. Back seats. Late hours. Nightclubs. Poker games. Bridge parties. Movie theaters. Whatever it is that gives Satan a foothold in your life, stay away from it. Watch out!

Second tool: “Pray.” Prayer isn’t telling God anything new. There is not a sinner nor a saint who would surprise him. What prayer does is invite God to walk the shadowy pathways of life with us. Prayer is asking God to watch ahead for falling trees and tumbling boulders and to bring up the rear, guarding our backside from the poison darts of the devil.

“Watch and pray.” Good advice. Let’s take it. It could be the difference between a peaceful day on the lake and a stick of dynamite blowing up in our faces.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 14:50

<sup>2</sup> Mark 14:38

# THE DEFEAT OF THE TONGUE

Insensitivity makes a wound that heals slowly. If someone hurts your feelings intentionally you know how to react. You know the source of the pain. But if someone accidentally bruises your soul, it's difficult to know how to respond.

Someone at work criticizes the new boss who also happens to be your dear friend. "Oh, I'm sorry—I forgot the two of you were so close."

A joke is told at a party about overweight people. You're overweight. You hear the joke. You smile politely while your heart sinks.

What was intended to be a reprimand for a decision or action becomes a personal attack. "You have a history of poor decisions, John."

Someone chooses to wash your dirty laundry in public. "Sue, is it true that you and Jim are separated?"

Insensitive comments. Thoughts that should have remained thoughts. Feelings which had no business being expressed. Opinions carelessly tossed like a grenade into a crowd.

And if you were to tell the one who threw these thoughtless darts about the pain they caused, his response would be "Oh, but I had no intention...I didn't realize you were so sensitive!" or "I forgot you were here."

Listed under the title of subterfuge is the poison of insensitivity. It's called subterfuge because it's so subtle. Just a slip of the tongue. Just a blank of memory. No one is at fault. No harm done.

Perhaps. And, perhaps not. For as the innocent attackers go on their way excusing themselves for things done without hurtful intention, a wounded soul is left in the dust, utterly confused. "If no one intended to hurt me, then why do I hurt so badly?"

God's Word has strong medicine for those who carelessly wag their tongues.

The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.<sup>1</sup>

He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps himself from calamity.<sup>2</sup>

He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James 3:6

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 21:23

<sup>3</sup> Proverbs 13:3

<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 10:19

When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise.<sup>4</sup>

The message is clear: He who dares to call himself God's ambassador is not afforded the luxury of idle words. Excuses such as "I didn't know you were here" or "I didn't realize this was so touchy" are shallow when they come from those who claim to be followers and imitators of the Great Physician. We have an added responsibility to guard our tongues.

These practical steps will purge careless words from your talk.

1. Never tell jokes that slander.
2. Never criticize in public unless you: have already expressed your disappointment with the other person in private, have already taken someone with you to discuss the grievance with the person, and are absolutely convinced that public reprimand is necessary and will be helpful.
3. Never say anything about anyone in their absence that you wouldn't say in their presence.

Insensitive slurs may be accidental, but they are not excusable.

## VICTORY OVER TEMPER

*“They do not know what they are doing.”*

*Luke 23:34*

Thirty-seven years old. Thin, almost frail. Balding and bespectacled. An electronics buff. Law-abiding and tired. Certainly not a description you would give a vigilante.

But that didn't bother the American public. When Bernhard Hugo Goetz blasted four would-be muggers in a New York subway, he instantly became a hero.

It's not hard to see why.

Bernhard Goetz was an American fantasy come true. He did what every citizen wants to do. He fought back. He “kicked the villain in the nose.” He “clobbered evil over the head.”

This unassuming hero embodied a nationwide, even worldwide anger: a passion for revenge. People are mad. People are angry. There is a pent-up, boiling rage that causes us to toast a man who fearlessly (of fearfully) says, “I ain't taking it no more!” and then comes out with a hot pistol in each hand.

We're tired. We're tired of being bullied, harassed, and intimidated. We're weary of the serial murderers, rapists, and hired assassins.

We're angry at someone, but we don't know who. We're scared of something, but we don't know what. We want to fight back, but we don't know how. And then, when a modern-day Wyatt Earp walks onto the scene, we applaud him. He is speaking for us! “That-a-way to go, Thug-buster; that's the way to do it!”

Or is it? Is that really the way to do it? Let's think about our anger for just a minute.

Anger. It's a peculiar yet predictable emotion. It begins as a drop of water. An irritant. A frustration. Nothing big, Just an aggravation. Someone gets your parking place. Someone pulls in front of you on the freeway. A waitress is slow and you are in a hurry. The toast burns. Drops of water. Drip. Drip. Drip. Drip.

Yet, get enough of these seemingly innocent drops of anger and before long you've got a bucket full of rage. Walking revenge. Blind bitterness. Unharnessed hatred. We trust no one and bare our teeth at anyone who gets near. We become walking time bombs that, given just the right tension and fear, could explode like Mr. Goetz.

Now, is that any way to live? What good has hatred ever brought? What hope has anger ever created? What problems have ever been resolved by revenge?

Yet, what do we do? We can't deny that our anger exists. How do we harness it? A good option is found in Luke 23:34. Here, Jesus speaks about the mob that killed him. "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Have you ever wondered how Jesus kept from retaliating? Have you ever asked how he kept his control? Here's the answer. It's the second part of his statement: "for they do not know what they are doing." Look carefully. It's as if Jesus considered this bloodthirsty, death-hungry crowd not as murderers, but as victims. It's as if he regarded them not as a militant mob but, as he put it, as "sheep without a shepherd."

"They don't know what they are doing."

And when you think about it, they didn't. They hadn't the faintest idea what they were doing. They were a stir-crazy mob, mad at something they couldn't see so they took it out on, of all people, God. But they didn't know what they were doing.

And for the most part, neither do we. We are still, as much as we hate to admit it, shepherdless sheep. All we know is that we were born out of one eternity and are frighteningly close to another. We play tag with the fuzzy realities of death and pain. We can't answer our own questions about love and hurt. We can't keep ourselves out of war. We can't even keep ourselves fed.

Paul spoke for humanity when he confessed, "I do not know what I am doing."<sup>1</sup>

Now, I know that doesn't justify anything. That doesn't justify hit-and-run drivers or kiddie-porn peddlers or heroin dealers. But it does help explain why they do the miserable things they do.

My point is this: Uncontrolled anger won't better our world, but sympathetic understanding will. Once we see the world and ourselves for what we are, we can help. Once we understand ourselves we begin to operate not from a posture of anger but of compassion and concern. We look at the world not with bitter frowns but with extended hands. We realize that the lights are out and a lot of people are stumbling in the darkness. So we light candles.

As Michelangelo said, "We criticize by creating." Instead of fighting back we help out. We go to the ghettos. We teach in the schools. We build hospitals and help orphans...and we put away our guns.

"They do not know what they are doing."

There is something about understanding the world that makes us want to save it, even to die for it.

Anger? Anger never did anyone any good. Understanding? Well, the results are not as quick as the vigilante's bullet, but they are certainly much more constructive.

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 7:15, author's paraphrase.

## Chapter Four

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# THE CONQUEST OF THE FAMILIAR

*“Lord...let me know how fleeting my life is.”  
Psalm 39:4*

Abraham Lincoln once listened to the pleas of the mother of a soldier who'd been sentenced to hang for treason. She begged the President to grant a pardon. Lincoln agreed. Yet, he's reported to have left the lady with the following words: “Still, I wish we could teach him a lesson. I wish we could give him just a little bit of hangin’.”

I think I know what the old rail-splitter had in mind. Yesterday, I got a little bit of hangin’.

We were having Sunday lunch at the home of a fellow missionary family. It was after the meal, and I was in the kitchen while Denalyn and our friends, Paul and Debbie, were talking in the living room. Their three-year-old daughter Beth Ann was playing with our two-year-old Jenna in the front yard. All of a sudden Beth Ann rushed in with a look of panic on her face. “Jenna is in the pool!”

Paul was the first to arrive at the poolside. He went straight into the water. Denalyn was next to arrive. By the time I arrived, Paul had lifted her up out of the water to the extended hands of her mother. Jenna was simultaneously choking, crying, and coughing. She vomited a bellyful of water. I held her as she cried. Denalyn began to weep. I began to sweat.

For the rest of the day I couldn't hold her enough, nor could we thank little Beth Ann enough (we took her out for ice cream). I still can't thank God enough.

It was only a matter of minutes, maybe seconds. *We almost lost her.* The thought was numbing and convicting.

It was a little bit of hangin’.

The stool was kicked out from under my feet and the rope jerked around my neck just long enough to remind me of what really matters. It was a divine slap, a gracious knock on the head, a severe mercy. Because of it I came face to face with one of the underground's slyest agents—the agent of familiarity.

His commission from the black throne room is clear, and total: “Take nothing from your victim; cause him only to take everything for granted.”

He'd been on my trail for years and I never knew it. But I know it now. I've come to recognize his tactics and detect his presence. And I'm doing my best to keep him out. His aim is deadly. His goal is nothing less than to take what is most precious to us and make it appear most common.

He won't steal your salvation; he'll just make you forget what it was like to be lost. You'll grow accustomed to prayer and thereby not pray. Worship will become commonplace and study optional. With the passing of time he'll infiltrate your heart with boredom and cover the cross with dust so you'll



be safely out of reach of change. Score one for the agent of familiarity.

Nor will he steal your home from you; he'll do something far worse. He'll paint it with a familiar coat of drabness.

He'll replace evening gowns with bathrobes, nights on the town with evenings in the recliner, and romance with routine. He'll scatter the dust of yesterday over the wedding pictures in the hallway until they become a memory of another couple in another time.

He won't take your children, he'll just make you too busy to notice them. His whispers to procrastinate are seductive. There is always next summer to coach the team, next month to go to the lake, and next week to teach Johnny how to pray. He'll make you forget that the faces around your table will soon be at tables of their own. Hence, books will go unread, games will go unplayed, hearts will go unnurtured, and opportunities will go ignored. All because the poison of the ordinary has deadened your senses to the magic of the moment.

Before you know it, the little face that brought tears to your eyes in the delivery room has become—perish the thought—common. A common kid sitting in the back seat of your van as you whiz down the fast lane of life. Unless something changes, unless someone wakes you up, that common kid will become a common stranger.

A little bit of hangin' might do us all a bit of good.

On a shelf above my desk is a picture of two little girls. They're holding hands and standing in front of a swimming pool; the same pool from which the younger of the two had been pulled only minutes before. I put the picture where I would see it daily so I would remember what God doesn't want me to forget.

And you can bet this time I'm going to remember. I don't want any more hangin'. Not even a little bit.

# STUDY GUIDE

## *Chapter 1: Triumph Over Temptation*

*One statement made by our master offers two basic tools for keeping our cool in the heat of a decision. “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.”*

- A. Have you ever been in a “garden of decision” yourself? In what way has your loyalty been challenged? When you are suddenly faced with a decision, how do you tend to react?
- B. How would you restate the following passages in modern terms: Proverbs 4:23-27; I Corinthians 16:13; I Peter 5:8?
- C. It is said that a person’s character is revealed in moments of crisis. What specific suggestions can you make for preparing ahead of time so that a Christ-like character is revealed in moments of crisis and sudden decision?
- D. What specific temptations are you praying for in regard to yourself? What decisions are you praying for currently? In what other areas might you want to invite God to walk with you?

## *Chapter 2: The Defeat of the Tongue*

*I. If someone hurts your feelings intentionally, you know how to react. You know the source of the pain. But if someone accidentally bruises your soul, it’s difficult to know how to respond.*

- A. How do you respond if someone intentionally attacks you or your family or your friends? How do you respond if someone accidentally hurts you? Do you acknowledge it or ignore it? Can you slough it off or does the pain linger?
- B. What wisdom do the following verses provide in responding to insults, intentional or not: Proverbs 19:11; Ecclesiastes 7:21-22; Luke 11:4; Luke 17:3-4; and I Corinthians 4:12-13?

*II. He who dares to call himself God’s ambassador is not afforded the luxury of idle words.*

- A. Give an example of an instance in which you accidentally hurt someone by what you said.
- B. Read Matthew 12:33-37. What is meant by “careless” words? What does this passage mean?
- C. Read Proverbs 10:1-32. What contrasts are there between the words of the wicked and the words of the righteous?

### Chapter 3: Victory Over Temper

*I. Anger. It's a peculiar yet predictable emotion. It begins as a drop of water...yet enough of these seemingly innocent drops of anger and before long you've got a bucket full of rage...We become walking time bombs that, given just the right tension and fear, could explode like Mr. Goetz.*

- A. How "serious" a sin is anger, judging by Galations 5:19-21?
- B. According to these passages, what typically accompanies anger: Proverbs 14:17,29; Ecclesiastes 7:9; James 1:19-20? What would these passages indicate as antidotes to anger? In view of these passages, would you say "counting to ten" has some value?

*II. Uncontrolled anger won't better our world, but sympathetic understanding will. Once we see the world and ourselves for what we are, we can help.*

- A. What makes you angry? Have you ever been uncontrollably angry? How does it feel? What helps you control your anger?
- B. When Stephen was stoned to death, he uttered a similar statement to Jesus' statement. Read Acts 6:8-15 and 7:54-8:1. What parallels are there between Jesus' nature and Stephen's? How did their words at their death affect those around them?
- C. Goetz prepared for a situation that made him angry by carrying a gun. What "weapons" could you arm yourself with so that you would be able to handle a difficult situation with understanding instead of anger?

### Chapter 4: The Conquest of the Familiar

*I. His aim is deadly. His goal is nothing less than to take what is most precious to us and make it appear most common.*

- A. What things are easiest for us to take for granted? A mate? Children? Health? God's love? Our lives? The future? Our salvation?
- B. What happens when we take our salvation for granted and become mediocre? What warning was given to the church in Ephesus that had lost its original love for Christ (Revelation 2:2-5)? What warning was given to the church in Laodicea for being lukewarm (Revelation 3:14-22)?
- C. How can we keep from taking for granted that which is precious? As Max put the picture of Jenna on his desk, what reminder of "the precious" could you put in front of yourself?

*II. The stool was kicked out from under my feet and the rope jerked around my neck just long enough to remind me of what really matters. It was a divine slap, a*

*gracious knock on the head, a severe mercy.*

- A. What is meant by a “severe mercy?” Have you experienced a “severe mercy,” “a divine slap?” What happened? How did it change you?
- B. In each of the following cases, how was a “divine slap” given: Jonah (Jonah 1-4); Zechariah (Luke 1:5-25, 57-80); Paul (II Corinthians 12:7-10)? What benefit came from each?
- C. How can we learn to respond to difficulties as severe mercies rather than letting difficulties defeat us?

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